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Washington — A plan to replace the Stillwater Lift Bridge with a four-lane highway span over the St. Croix River will get a hearing before a congressional subcommittee on Wednesday.

A proposed bill sponsored by Republican U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann would waive federal environmental laws to allow for a new bridge to be built.

If the bill makes its way through Congress and President Barack Obama, it could end the long legal dispute over whether building a new bridge would violate the river's protected status as a Wild and Scenic Riverway. But some say it would also weaken federal legislation aimed at protecting the nation's most pristine riverways from development.

Over the years, environmental groups have fought proposals to build a new bridge over the St. Croix, saying it would harm the area. On Wednesday, a coalition of 24 Wisconsin and Minnesota environmental organizations issued a statement urging the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands to reject the proposal.

"Rather than gutting the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in order to push through this over-engineered, massive new bridge, what we need is a true transportation solution — a low-profile, modestly-scaled bridge that reflects the real traffic need and honors the federally-protected status of the St. Croix," the environmental groups wrote in a letter to U.S. Rep. Doc Hastings, a Republican from Washington state who oversees the subcommittee.

Although the bill only addresses the bridge over the St. Croix, the groups said it would set a "damaging national precedent."

Oak Park Heights Mayor David Beaudet, who will testify Wednesday against the new bridge, agreed.

"If we exempt bridges from the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act here, we exempt it for all wild and scenic rivers in the United States," he said, adding the proposed bridge is also too big and expensive.

But Bachmann has argued that the project cannot be further delayed. The first proposal to replace the 80-year-old Stillwater Lift Bridge would have cost \$80 million, she said. The estimated cost of the latest proposal is more than \$600 million.

"The St. Croix River Crossing Project is no longer a matter of 'if' it is necessary. That has been determined. This is an issue of how much we will pay in dollars, and possibly lives, before we act," Bachmann said in prepared remarks she plans to deliver at the subcommittee hearing.

Bachmann, who represents the area where the bridge would be built, said Minnesota and Wisconsin have lined up funds for a replacement bridge.

"The problem really has never been the funding," she said in an interview. "The problem has been the roadblocks that have been put up really by radical groups that have decided that they want to see this bridge not built."

Bachmann has bipartisan support on the issue, including from Gov. Mark Dayton and Sen. Amy Klobuchar, both Democrats.

But Democratic U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum opposes the bridge, saying Bachmann's plan is too large and expensive. Sen. Al Franken, also a Democrat, hasn't yet taken a position on the issue.